

A Shared Vision:

Co-Designing an All-Age Careers Framework in County Durham

Executive Summary
March 2025



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dmh associates

In 2008, Dr Deirdre Hughes OBE established dmh associates to encourage collaboration and fresh thinking in careers, education and skills policy, research and practice. The outcomes from the organisation's work are designed to inform and influence policies, research and practice in the UK, Europe and internationally.

The company is based in North Shields, England. Our expertise includes consultancy, evaluation, evidence and impact assessment, literature reviews, qualitative and quantitative research, digital and labour market intelligence (LMI). We provide a full range of activities each tailored to meet specific organisational or individual needs.

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Introduction

In May 2024, Durham County Council, in collaboration with the County Durham Economic Partnership Board and the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) Technical Funding Group, commissioned dmh associates to assist in developing an All-Age Careers Framework for County Durham. It was formally agreed dmh associates would carry out a research, facilitation, and planning piece of work, to prepare the ground for creating an innovative approach to support the careers support offer for people of all ages across County Durham between May 2024 and February 2025.

This Executive Summary and Main Report are complemented by three separate supporting evidence-based technical papers: (i) *LMI Analysis: Context for County Durham's All-Age Careers Framework*; (ii) *Return on Investment (ROI): Context for County Durham's All-Age Careers Framework*; and (iii) *The Voices of Residents and Businesses in County Durham* that have informed key findings and recommendations.

Definitions

Terms such as 'careers education, information, advice and guidance', 'career education', 'career counselling', 'career development', 'vocational counselling', 'vocational guidance', 'guidance counselling', 'educational and vocational orientation', 'employability', 'enterprise' are often used to refer to diverse activities in a broad careers eco-system landscape. This is contested territory, therefore reaching agreement on the language and definition of the all-age careers framework is essential. Following extensive dialogue with key stakeholders, it was agreed to use the term careers information, advice and guidance (CIAG) throughout this report. See: Appendix 1 – Glossary of Terms.

Focus

Undertake research into current careers information, advice and guidance (CIAG) offers for young people and adults both within County Durham, the UK and beyond. Facilitate discussions with key players bringing together key stakeholders and partner representatives to explore best practice throughout the wider careers ecosystem

Out of scope

How existing careers provision in County Durham is funded, along with associated staffing and other costs.

Methodology

The research undertaken involved both quantitative and qualitative analysis of data, surveys, a Call for Evidence – Have Your Say, consultation events, group and one-to-one interviews with young people and adults. A total of 2,111 residents and businesses contributed to the research drawn from a wide range of geographical areas in County Durham.

Key findings

County Durham is a large and unique rural county – the 8th largest in the country by population – Durham City and its large towns and market towns act as major centres, but two in five residents live in rural areas. This emphasises the need to address issues related to supporting individuals in their search for more meaningful learning and work opportunities, particularly those with poor transport and digital connectivity. The county accounts for the largest geographical area in the region (NELSIP, 2023).

The proposed all-age careers framework 2025 – 2035 is informed by *A Vision for County Durham (2019–2035)* which provides a shared understanding of what strategic partners want County Durham to look like by 2035, for example:

- ▶ More and better jobs;
- ▶ People living long and independent lives; and
- ▶ Connected communities within an inclusive, green economy.

The Durham County Council Plan (2024 – 2028) highlights the county's growth, with detailed plans for housing and employment expansion. *The County Durham Inclusive Economic Strategy (IES 2023–2035)*, the North East Local Skills Improvement Plan (NELSIP), and the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) are also critical drivers and enablers in achieving these goals.

The Institute for Employment Research (IER) at Warwick University provides insights into socio-economic trends in the county.

Findings highlight:



16 wards defined as 'left behind neighbourhoods' the most of any local authority



17% increase in the 20-29 population 2022-2035



37% economically inactive due to ill health – higher than the North East and England



75% employment rate, higher than the North East



40% of employment in managerial, professional, and associate professional and technical occupations



9% growth in these occupations 2025-2035 – North East Combined Authority (NECA)



43% of employers report under-utilised staff



91% of KS4 young people entering a sustained destination



4.9 training days per employee higher than in North East and England



+24 percentage point difference of disadvantaged 21 year olds in non-sustained destinations compared to their non-disadvantaged peers



17% forecast growth in high skill employment 2025-2035 – NECA

- ▶ **trends in demographic change, employment rates, and the impact of the Real Living Wage:** offering insights into how these factors influence individuals' lives and the local economy.
- ▶ **employment distribution across sectors:** showing employment trends and the challenges employers face in recruitment.
- ▶ **despite a relatively advantageous economic base, published research shows high levels of deprivation across the county e.g. high levels of deprivation with 12% of neighbourhoods in the 10% most deprived in the county:** this presents County Durham as one of the most deprived local authorities in England.
- ▶ **the Council's adopted Poverty Action Strategy (PAS) and Action Plan is vital in this tough socio-economic environment:** whereby practitioners are firmly anchored in multi-agency working within areas of high deprivation.

Our data analysis shows schools and colleges in County Durham are underperforming in relation to 'Good Career Guidance' as set out in the nationally recognised Gatsby Benchmarks. Together, these elements underscore the need for a robust all-age careers support system that can adapt to the evolving demands of both individuals and businesses over the next decade. Such a system is essential for ensuring individuals of all ages are equipped with the skills and opportunities needed to thrive in an increasingly dynamic and diverse labour market.

Examples of economic growth projects:

In East Durham, the Satellite Applications Centre of Excellence & Space Cluster is funded by the UK Space Agency and Satellite Applications Catapult based at the North East Technology Park (NETpark). This will be part of a network of national facilities to support specialist technology development, testing, manufacture, and in-space operations.

Amazon occupies a 2.1m sq. ft. unit at Integra 61 Bowburn provides around 1,600 jobs and supported internships for those with Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities (SEND) and/or additional needs. Integra 61 represents the largest logistics and manufacturing opportunity the North East has seen in a generation.

AEL Automation Ltd. Based at Bowburn Industrial Estate (NB previously known as Altec Engineering). This company is particularly supportive of apprenticeships.

BTS Facades & Fabrications. Based in Aycliffe Business Park, Newton Aycliffe are experts in the supply and manufacture of Rainscreen systems and Facade systems. They proactively contribute to CEAIG in schools.

Other selected examples based at NETpark include:

aXenc leaders in Optical modulators for satellite and aerospace communications

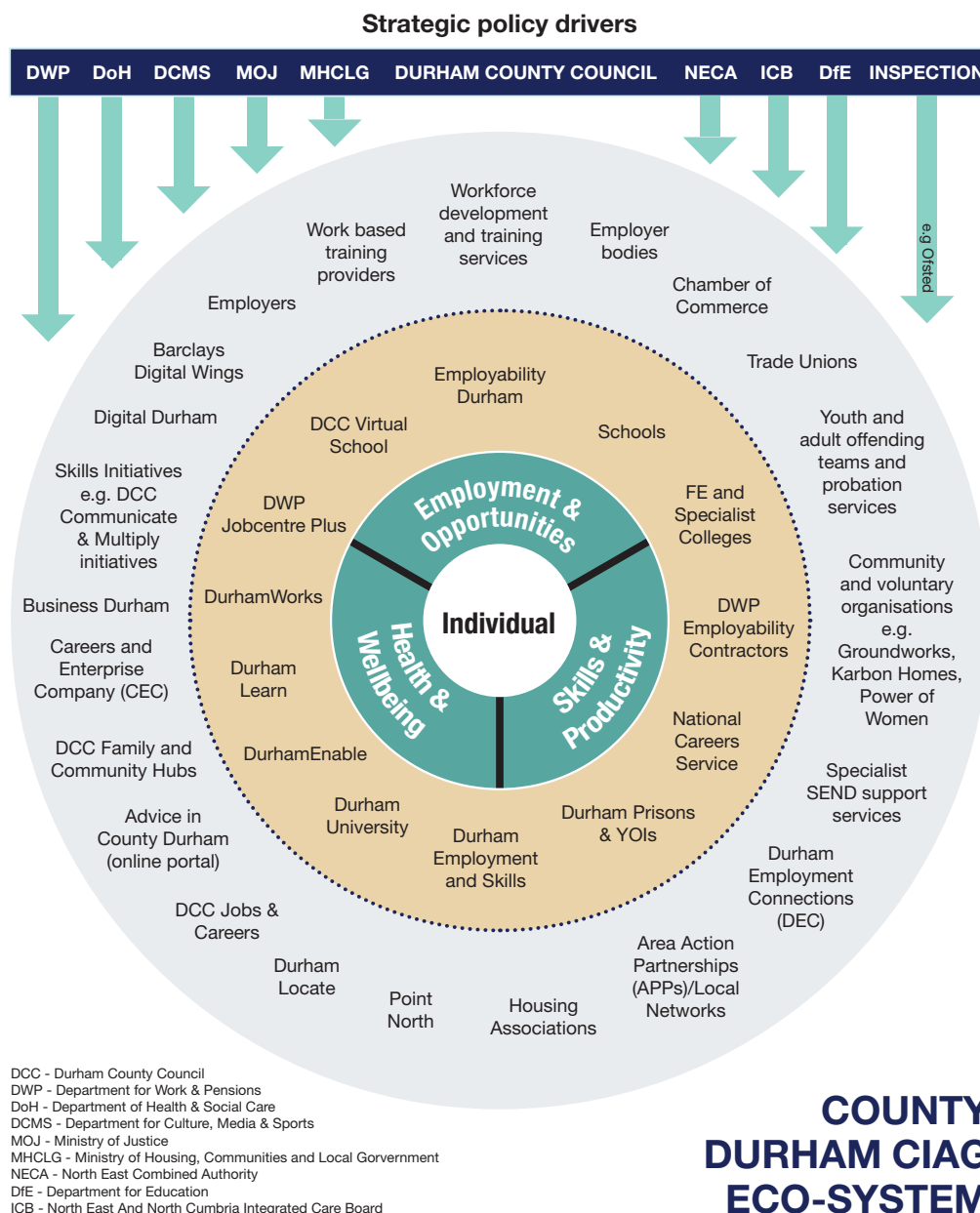
Kromek Group plc is a cutting-edge, forward-thinking company creating state of the art radiation and biological detection solutions for use in Civil Nuclear, Security & Defence, Biological Detection, Medical and Industrial & Security markets.

Kratos specialises in technology innovation for national security.

The Centre for Process Innovation (CPI) specialises in deep tech for agrifood, Energy, Health Tech, Materials, Pharmaceutical.

The Countywide Careers Eco-System

We outline the current careers support system in operation, highlighting both its key strengths and limitations to inform the design and development of an effective all-age careers support system for the period leading up to 2035, in alignment with key policy drivers. For example:



Numerous examples of innovative and effective approaches to CIAG have been identified as outlined in the main report. Key strengths in the system include inter alia e.g. Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs), Career-related Learning (CRL) in Primary Schools, Civic Forums Established by Schools, Planning and Commissioning of Services for those with Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities (SEND), DurhamWorks Programme, DurhamEnable Supported Employment Services, Employability Durham, Durham County Council Area Action Partnerships / Local Networks, Community Trusted Partnership Working between Jobcentre Plus, National Careers Service, and Durham County Council, Jobcentre Plus Initiatives: Barclays Digital Wings and DWP Mid-Life MOT, Multi-Agency One-Stop Centres, The North East Careers Hub, Parental Engagement Online, Durham University: Careers, Employability, and Enterprise Service, The North East Prisons Group, County Durham Partnership Networks and various frameworks designed to guide careers support policies and practices across sectors and services. There are a number of CIAG training companies and in-house training delivered with Durham County Council.

Investment by Durham County Council has enabled careers support to be embedded deep in local communities, although much of the work is based mainly on short-term contracts. Strong partnerships exist between local and national agencies, employers, training providers, educational institutions and community groups. The system is designed to be seamless i.e., an initiative for nearly all categories of people with multiple webpages and varying degrees of up-to-date labour market intelligence.

There is a need to further coordinate and amplify these efforts, ensuring that best practices are shared and that opportunities for learning and collaboration are fully realised. Like many other areas, County Durham faces significant challenges now and in the future. These challenges will be explored further in the following section, which delves into the various stakeholder perspectives and gaps or limitations in CIAG provision identified across the region.

The Voices of County Durham Residents and Businesses

We highlight key lessons learned from 2,111 residents and businesses who contributed to the research, capturing their views and experiences of strengths and limitations in the current system and with ideas on how an all-age careers offer can be achieved going forward. More detailed insights are provided in the main report and separate *The Voices of Residents and Businesses: Context for an All-Age Careers Framework* complementary evidence-based technical report.

School and College views

- ▶ **Strong leadership and collaboration across the County is essential for a successful all-age (all-ability) careers ecosystem.** This necessitates greater buy-in from senior leadership teams to ensure careers provision is prioritised and adequate resources are allocated. There is an appetite to foster a more joined-up approach, smooth transitions from education to employment, and sharing of data and resources.
- ▶ **Increased funding for careers provision is crucial,** moving away from an over-reliance on short-term funding, to address the resource constraints currently hindering effective CIAG delivery.
- ▶ **Services provided by DurhamWorks, aimed mainly at vulnerable young people,** were viewed as highly effective and were greatly valued.
- ▶ **Civic Forums were considered as good practice** and a step towards alliances being forged between schools, colleges, local employers, training providers and Durham County Council. There was a call for more employers willing to offer Teacher Industry Placements.

Student views

- ▶ When asked how careers provision in their school/college could be improved, 10% of student respondents identified a desire for **more engagement with the world of work**, either through visits or work experience. The most useful activity, selected by one-third (33%) of the students, is **work experience**, rated as “Extremely Useful.” This is followed by **vlogs, YouTube, or other social media careers videos**, selected by 22% of respondents.
- ▶ 65% of students reported that **careers activities in school or college increased their awareness of different careers**. Additionally, 50% had more ideas about their future, and 44% felt more motivated to work hard. However, **younger students were less likely to feel supported by schools compared to older students**. This is due to the limited resources available for younger students, with mock interviews, work experience, and individual sessions being more accessible to older groups. **Over 57% of students in Years 7-9 had no access to careers activities**, suggesting schools prioritise tailored support for older students.

Parent views

- ▶ **Lack of awareness:** A significant majority of parents (87%) did not know who the careers leader was in their child (ren)’s school.
- ▶ **Mixed views on support:** They were divided on whether their children received adequate careers guidance. While 41% agreed or strongly agreed, a significant proportion (42%) didn’t know, and 17% disagreed. This uncertainty highlights inconsistencies in CEIAG provision across schools and emphasises the need for clearer communication and more consistent delivery.
- ▶ **Concerns about academic focus:** Several parents voiced concerns that schools prioritise academic achievement over preparing students for the world of work. This included a perception that schools often assume university is the default pathway, potentially neglecting alternative options like apprenticeships and ‘T Levels’. These observations align with employer feedback, suggesting a need to rebalance the focus in education and promote a wider range of career pathways.
- ▶ **Desire for more employer engagement:** Parents expressed a desire for schools to bring employers into the classroom and provide more opportunities for students to interact with the world of work. This reinforces the importance of practical experiences and real-world connections in preparing young people for future careers.

Young people 16+ and adults' views

- ▶ **The importance of careers guidance:** A significant majority of respondents (60%) consider careers guidance to be either “essential” or “very important” delivered by professionally trained careers advisers. This highlights the continuing need for effective careers support from specialists, including for those beyond the traditional school-leaving age.
- ▶ **Mixed satisfaction:** While just over half of respondents reported receiving sufficient careers guidance, a closer look reveals a concerning trend. Those expressing satisfaction had actively engaged with a careers service or professional. In contrast, those who felt unsupported relied mainly on the internet and had not personally interacted with a careers adviser. This difference suggests a possible lack of awareness or difficulty navigating the available services, rather than a lack of need.
- ▶ **Preferred methods of support:** Respondents clearly favour personalised guidance, emphasising the value of **one-to-one meetings and group sessions with careers advisers**. This preference underscores the importance of human interaction and tailored advice in navigating career choices. The survey also highlights the need for age-appropriate activities.
- ▶ While **older adults favoured skills assessments**, recognising their existing experience, **younger respondents leaned towards virtual work placements or hands-on work experience**, reflecting their need to explore options and develop practical skills.

Consultation events and the Call for Evidence

As well as sharing what is working well in the county, these specific barriers were identified as getting in the way of individuals gaining access to CIAG:

Rurality and Transport Issues



- Limited public transport in rural areas, creating barriers to accessing learning and work opportunities.
- Courses and job opportunities are concentrated in larger towns and cities, restricting access for rural residents.

Short-Term Funding and Strategic Gaps



- Over-reliance on short-term funding for CIAG initiatives.
- Absence of a long-term vision or comprehensive plan to improve CIAG services sustainably.

Insufficient CIAG Provision for All Ages and Abilities



- Gaps in tailored careers provision for all age groups, particularly post-primary students, adults aged 21+, and individuals with SEND.
- Limited CIAG visibility of ongoing work in primary schools, with opportunities to better understand and nurture children's early career aspirations and 'can do' skills transferred successfully into post-primary schooling.
- Inequitable access to CIAG in schools, with insufficient career exploration opportunities
- Pressure on recruitment of qualified teachers and careers professionals (Level 6/7) to meet demand.
- Adults reflect on historical gaps in CIAG during their schooling, highlighting a lasting impact on career development and wellbeing.

Employment and Wellbeing Support



- Challenges include workplace unfamiliarity, lack of employer investment in training, and the need for agility, resilience and mental health wellbeing to enable progression.

Broadband, Digital Resources, and Digital Literacy



- Barriers to accessing online CIAG resources due to limited broadband in rural areas and low digital skills, particularly among older adults.
- Lack of a clear, centralised, and trustworthy 24/7 digital CIAG resource.
- Reliance on word-of-mouth opportunities and inconsistent sharing of labour market intelligence/information (LMI) among agencies.

Navigational and Financial Barriers to Learning and Work



- Difficulty navigating multiple platforms for course and opportunity information.
- Affordability and funding challenges, especially for groups such as care leavers, NEET individuals, women returners, and those underemployed relative to their qualifications.
- Insufficient tailored CIAG for individuals with SEND, despite some exceptions like DurhamEnable, DEC Network support and Durham University.

Accessibility and Availability of CIAG Resources



- Confusion over where and how to access CIAG, with limited out-of-hours support for young people and adults.
- Missed opportunities to leverage innovative technologies like AI, chatbots, virtual reality, virtual centres of excellence in sector specific areas, and digital engagement tools to enhance accessibility and increase levels of engagement.

We also identified from discussions with key stakeholders:

- ▶ **Underutilised Talents:** It's not just the lack of qualifications—many individuals' talents remain underutilised, leading to missed opportunities for both personal economic growth and broader societal well-being.
- ▶ **Insufficient Numbers of Employers Engaged in Careers Activities:** This presents a significant barrier, with a shortage of employers reported as being willing to participate in initiatives for students, young people, and adults. This includes a lack of real-world industry placements for teachers, limited opportunities for students to engage in work experience, industry-related projects or work placements, which diminishes their understanding of the evolving world of work. The latter part of this issue is especially important, as it highlights the critical need for hands-on experience and industry involvement to better prepare individuals for the world of work.

"The information about courses isn't clear. What's online is confusing. I completed two courses, passed with distinction, and later found out they weren't actually what I needed. They cost me £2,000, and now I have to start over. The Level 3 course I need is hard to find—only two colleges near me offer it—but I can't speak to anyone directly; it's all emails and online forms, and no one responds." (Adult)

Interviews with key stakeholders

- ▶ **Employers need and want a strong talent pipeline.** Some queried where and how labour market intelligence (LMI) is shared with young people and adults across the County.
- ▶ **College Leaders and Durham University staff showcased their 'careers, employability and enterprise' provision** and indicated a willingness to do more to drive forward an all-age Careers Framework.
- ▶ **Community and voluntary agencies indicated their efforts within local communities were frequently overlooked or under-utilised.**
- ▶ **Durham County Council staff emphasised various careers and employability initiatives, though most are short-term funded,** resulting in uncertainty and hindering long-term planning.
- ▶ **The National Careers Services, Jobcentre Plus and Durham Council** have a well-established history of working closely together to plan and deliver careers and employability support.

A key message conveyed by participants in all interviews:

"The careers eco-system is fragmented and incoherent to the majority of people in the County."

Findings from a series of consultation events

- ▶ **The top eight words which were deemed as essential in a new Careers Framework** were as follows: personalised, aspirations, inclusion, resilience, accessible, collaboration, opportunities and quality.
- ▶ **Gaps in careers support for children and young people:** Funding and provision (mainly short-term), employer engagement and support for those with SEND, unreliable transport links, impartial access to Careers Advisers (CAs) for young people; low aspirations, teachers lack training in careers and lack of curriculum time; insufficient knowledge of labour market opportunities; perceived absence of career-related learning in primary schools, insufficient links between industry and local schools and colleges; insufficient numbers of employers willing to engage in careers activities in schools; a holistic approach to skills and career development with not enough joined up working between agencies.
- ▶ **Gaps in careers support for adults, including those within and outside of the workplace:** Short-term funding and reactive approaches, limited careers support for those in work, career changers etc; high cost of retraining; lack of affordable training; adults need guidance on how to upskill/reskill/ transfer their skills for progression; insufficient work experience opportunities; links made between career development and wellbeing; complex needs require human-centred services; low visibility and awareness of careers support on offer; stigma associated with DWP Jobcentres discourages engagement; lack of well-known trusted brand for careers support; lack of understanding of LMI and emerging job markets; some employers resist developing employees focusing on retention; poor public transport system; insufficient digital skills; lack of knowledge of progression opportunities linked to skills and qualifications; employers need strategies to prevent drop-out from the workplace; more employers need to step up and offer careers support activities.

Addressing these barriers requires a multifaceted approach involving increased funding, improved collaboration between stakeholders, enhanced careers education in schools, better promotion of services, and targeted support for disadvantaged groups. By tackling these challenges, County Durham can create a more equitable and effective careers guidance system that empowers all individuals to reach their full potential.

The CIAG eco-system is struggling...

While there are pockets of effective collaboration among career services in County Durham, a more consistent, coordinated, and integrated approach is needed to improve overall service effectiveness and better support individuals in their career journeys. Policies and practices are needed to ensure the right model of delivery and timing for careers support, focusing on young people and adults who need guidance the most. Greater priority should be given to capturing the views of young people and adults, enabling them to contribute to the co-design of an innovative and impactful all-age careers offer in County Durham.

“There is compelling ROI evidence to justify greater alignment and investment in CIAG across the county.”

An Emerging Consensus: Collaborative Ambition

There is a strong appetite among key stakeholders for careers, employability, and enterprise support services to ideally work more closely together, rather than in silos, to offer more seamless CIAG support. We also provide unique examples of return on investment (ROI) findings, human-centred ‘blended’ AI approaches, and encourage creativity and innovation moving forward with the new all-age careers framework.

County Durham has a track record of supporting and evaluating careers and employability projects, identifying a range of positive results as illustrated below and in the main report. While those projects rarely have the comparison group or counterfactual research techniques used, the reported outcomes and positive feedback point to successful projects. Our review identifies three well-evidenced key messages which underpin the value of collaborative efforts to enhance careers provision across County Durham:

- 1. Careers and employability provision works:** When providers, employers, government, and communities come together, people’s career journeys typically see tangible benefits in terms of employment, productivity, and wellbeing.
- 2. Taxpayer investments typically pay off:** The vast majority of ROI analyses identify a positive fiscal return from taxpayer investments in careers provision, with evidence mainly for secondary education students and unemployed adults.
- 3. County Durham has much to gain:** Career impact occurs locally, affecting individuals and employers in their own communities. While benefits may have been primarily measured elsewhere, there is strong potential for similar results through widespread community collaboration in County Durham.

Employers are highly likely to have a positive financial return on investment:

- ▶ **If good hires result from 0.05 or more out of every 100 pre-GCSE students engaged via careers talks** – even with no other benefits considered
- ▶ **If good hires result from 2 out of every 100 work experience students** – even with no other benefits considered
- ▶ **If good hires result from 3 out of every 100 work placements for students aged 16+ in technical or vocational courses** – even with no other benefits considered
- ▶ **If good hires result from 6 out of every 100 work placements for unemployed adults** – even with no other benefits being considered

These financial breakeven thresholds are likely to be conservative – see also separate complementary report *Return on Investment (ROI): Context for County Durham’s All-Age Careers Framework*.

Our research shows almost everyone who participated in the research activities unequivocally stated a desired need for an all-age careers framework (or strategy) - inclusive of people of all abilities starting from an early age, including those most disadvantaged, those vulnerable to being not in education, employment and/or training (NEET), those with SEND and participating in some form of alternative provision, and those in work and outside of work. Experience as much as careers information and advice is enriched by plentiful of first-hand exposure to the world of work. **Young people and adults are not gaining sufficient access to employers and the world of work.**

A new phenomenon – Artificial Intelligence (AI)

As the County considers the implications of AI and Generative Pre-Trained Transformers (GPTs) for the workforce, it is crucial to explore how this can be integrated into education, CIAG and employability related services to enhance, rather than replace, human expertise. Careers support, as a human-centred and personalised process, can facilitate effective career exploration when complemented by AI tools and an understanding of their limitations.

AI and human creativity are intersecting, offering an exciting opportunity to reimagine how to support teachers, careers advisers, employability and enterprise professionals, as well as other community specialists, and the young people and adults they serve.

“There is compelling ROI evidence to justify greater alignment and investment in CIAG across the county.”

We provide some examples of human-centred ‘blended’ AI approaches and encourage creativity and innovation going forward within a new All-Age Careers Framework.

Various generative AI tools include:

- ▶ **Chatbots and virtual assistants** e.g., ChatGPT and versions tailored to careers provision created by the report authors: CiCi the curated careers chatbot and Huxby, including psychometric testing, careers information and advice, with an inbuilt handover to a human careers adviser.
- ▶ **Content generation** text and email writing tools e.g., Jasper and Writesonic that create blog posts, marketing content, and social media posts based on user input
- ▶ **Image and video generation** e.g., DALL·E generates images from text descriptions
- ▶ **Data and analytics generation** e.g., Tableau’s “Explain Data”: provides AI-generated insights and explanations of data visualisations
- ▶ **Game content and story generation** e.g., Minecraft interactive text-based game where the AI generates unique, evolving storylines based on player input
- ▶ **Personalised learning and education** e.g., Squirrel AI generates personalised learning paths and content based
- ▶ **Visual design and marketing** e.g., Canva’s AI designed tools used to generate design elements such as templates, layouts, and graphics for marketing materials.

There are exciting opportunities for shared learning and more collaborative work between and across industry, education, local and combined authority, employability and enterprise agencies.

A Call for a Culture Change

There is a call for a culture change across the County to harness the significant CIAG expertise, experiences and resources that currently exist, alongside opportunities for new ‘blended hybrid’ approaches where human-centred services remain a priority, complemented by digital advancements. This involves:

- ▶ **A shift from ‘silos’ to ‘simplicity’**, moving towards greater alignment of initiatives and sustainability of CIAG policies and practices that demonstrate tangible impact. There are numerous multi-layers of variable quality CIAG in County Durham (including some excellent practices and resources) and some children, young people and adults are missing out, particularly those most vulnerable in local communities, including those in work.
- ▶ **An entitlement for everyone in County Durham to have high aspirations**, to be supported to make informed choices and decisions towards finding possibilities to differentiate themselves on their way to sustaining a livelihood and wellbeing.
- ▶ **A mechanism(s) for smoothing transitions**, alongside an urgent need to better understand new qualifications such as ‘T Levels’ and foundation apprenticeships, entry level pathways at all levels, particularly levels 1 & 2 for those not ready to progress onto level 3+, as well as supporting those level 3 and above to better utilise their talents and skills.

- ▶ **An explicit well-publicised County Durham careers and employability offer** for everyone that includes an entitlement and access to CIAG to address serious inequity that exists in the current arrangements. To achieve this agencies must come together, supported by strong leadership, working towards a commonly agreed quality standard within a more unified system.
- ▶ **To improve employer engagement in CIAG activities, several strategies can be implemented.** These approaches focus on facilitating communication, enhancing collaboration, and building long-term relationships between employers, educational institutions, and local authorities. Ideas for action were presented separately to the UKSPF Technical Group.

These strategies should be supported by passionate, dedicated individuals who can drive engagement and raise awareness. While goodwill and volunteer efforts can contribute, meaningful engagement at scale will require budgetary support to implement effectively.

Proposed Vision for County Durham

Careers information, advice and guidance (CIAG) will be a vital, embedded element of personal development, enhancing wellbeing and providing more equitable career and employability support opportunities for all residents in every community, across all stages of life.

Key Principles - Having access to good learning experiences and to decent work are an essential prerequisite to leading a prosperous life. Experiences in work and learning also have a profound impact on individuals' health and mental well-being. CIAG spans multiple elements of careers, employability, enterprise, health and skills. All CIAG support services have a role in enabling people to access economically sustainable lifestyles, which offer healthy long-term engagement lifelong learning and wellbeing.

- ▶ For local educationalists, community agencies, businesses and individuals, this involves the ability to work with uncertainty and ambiguity across organisational boundaries. These skills include the ability to inspire others into whole-system thinking and recognition of shared problems (Ramsden, 2019).

"By analysing the interconnectedness and interdependence of various components and processes, systems thinking helps us understand complex issues from a person-centred holistic perspective."

In today's fast-paced and ever-changing world, this approach is more relevant than ever. With the objective of achieving greater alignment of CIAG support services for children, young people and adults, we have paid particular regard to the scope for practical improvements in the way that various players within the careers, employability and enterprise eco-system interact with one another. This approach will minimise fragmented efforts, enabling a more efficient and coordinated use of resources to achieve greater collective impact. A Glossary of Terms is provided in Appendix 1 which can be added to going forward.



Seven key recommendations 2025 -2035

Theme	Key Recommendations	Key Actions
Leadership and Governance	<p>Key Recommendation 1</p> <p>The implementation of the All-Age Careers Framework should be led by a newly formed pan-sector Steering Group that comprises careers, employability, social mobility, poverty action, wellbeing, industry and economic development. The group will agree on annual CIAG priorities, including key performance indicators (KPIs) and measures to monitor progress within a strengthened, better co-ordinated and communicated ‘blended hybrid’ CIAG system. Senior leaders should be actively engaged to inform strategic direction, ensuring alignment with broader county-wide objectives. This should ensure accountability, transparency and effective oversight of CIAG across the county.</p>	<p>1a. Establishment of a Pan-Sector Steering Group. To drive forward and monitor the All-Age Careers Framework for children, young people, and adults across the county, a CIAG Steering Group should be formally established. This team will define its role within the broader leadership system of the county, including the reporting mechanisms and its influence over the direction of CIAG services.</p> <p>1b. Improving Communication, Collaboration, and Resource Sharing. A formal system needs to be established to improve communication and collaboration across the careers, employability, and enterprise sectors – a multi-agency approach. By leveraging existing mechanisms in economic development and existing careers, employability and enterprise networks, including social mobility and poverty action groups, build upon what’s already in place, ensuring a balance between working together and avoiding competition. This system can become more efficient sharing resources, continuous professional development (CPD) opportunities, and the co-production of high-quality CIAG services.</p>
Continuity of CIAG provision	<p>Key Recommendation 2</p> <p>Ensure high-quality CIAG serves as a ‘golden thread’ that is consistently available to children, young people, and adults, providing seamless support as they transition through key educational stages—from primary to secondary education, into post-16 pathways, and beyond on a lifelong basis.</p>	<p>2a. Establish a more seamless system of careers support in the education system and local communities for children, young people and adults. This should focus on capturing aspirations, skills, exposure to and experiences of the world of work. This will ensure that all individuals, regardless of age or background, are equipped with the skills, knowledge, and opportunities to thrive now and in the future in the evolving workforce, aligning with the national objective to increase access to high-quality CIAG for all and support for their transition into successful careers.</p> <p>2b. Start Early in Primary Schools. Encourage early career-related learning (CRL) for all children in County Durham to engage in activities that nurture and capture career aspirations, skills development, and broad understanding of potential sectors and occupations. This will empower children to see beyond their immediate surroundings and build confidence in their future, contributing to higher achievements and lower dropout rates. The continuity of this learning from primary through secondary education is vital for long-term success. An annual celebratory event could take place to share findings across the County given various activities are already underway. Also, skills children learn in primary could be shared more widely with secondary schools beyond the transfer of SATS results.</p> <p>2c. Promote the integration of career leadership and impartial career guidance into the curriculum, supported by industry engagement at all levels. To make certain that young people are adequately prepared for the future, it is essential that career leadership and impartial career guidance are integrated into the curriculum at all educational levels, supported by meaningful engagement with industry. While the national system sets statutory requirements, there is limited local control in Durham, and it is important that careers leads feel empowered to collaborate rather than disengage. Currently, the post-primary education system faces challenges in fairness, consistency, and equity, with many institutions not meeting the national Gatsby Benchmarks for good career guidance. This gap in provision limits young people’s confidence and ability to make informed career decisions, contributing to disparities in career outcomes. By embedding career leadership and fostering stronger industry connections across the curriculum, we can create a more cohesive, equitable, and effective CIAG system that supports individuals’ career-related learning from primary schooling and beyond.</p>

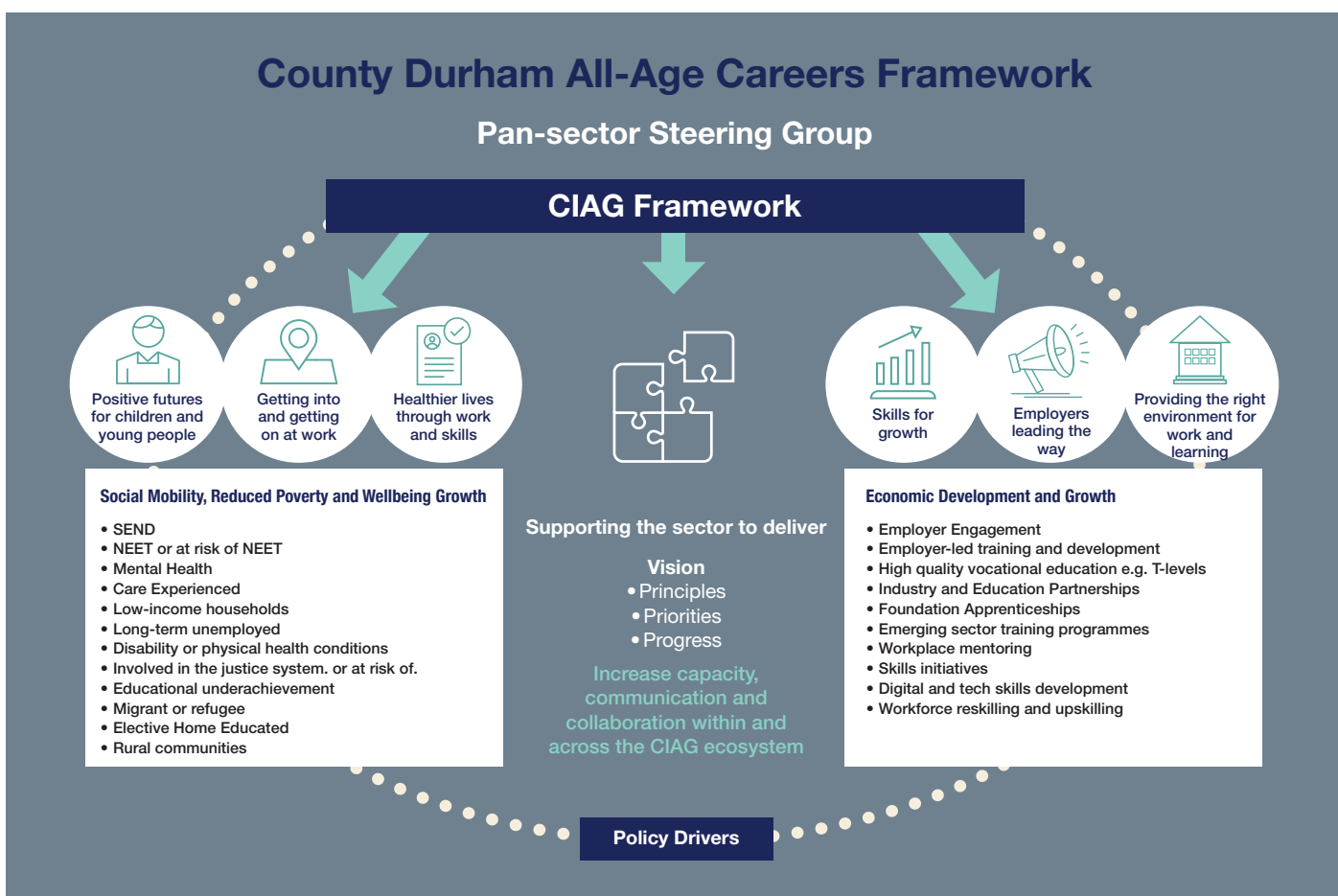
Theme	Key Recommendations	Key Actions
More Seamless Integrated CIAG Offer	<p>Key Recommendation 3</p> <p>County Durham residents should have opportunities to build and reinforce their skills through integrated careers and employability services offering access to trustworthy CIAG, engaging learning projects, meaningful activities, and experiential opportunities at the point at which they need them. This is an entitlement that needs to be explicit in all CIAG plans, activities and promotions.</p>	<p>3a. County Durham's inclusive careers offer must be both universal and targeted with specialist support for those most in need, including early interventions, preventions and recovery work. Develop and communicate a County Durham-wide CIAG entitlement that is promoted to all young people and adults to have access to high-quality CIAG at key transition points, from education to employment. This entitlement should be clearly embedded in all major County Durham partnerships, including careers, employability, enterprise, skills, health and financial support networks.</p> <p>3b. Set up an independent peer review system across the county to provide feedback to individual institutions, share best practice CIAG examples and provide support. This system already exists in The Careers and Enterprise (CEC) portfolio of activities, in SEND schools and in Durham University with other universities. Take steps to build upon and extend this approach further.</p> <p>3c. Build and strengthen partnerships with local and national industries to provide young people and adults with access to real-world insights, mentorship, and work-based and other experiential learning opportunities. Improve the co-ordination and communication of employer-led workshops, career fairs, industry talks, and mentorship programmes to explore various career options and the skills required. Additionally, explore more effective ways of co-hosting and sharing these CIAG events through civic community engagement, leveraging local networks and funding/sponsorship opportunities, partnerships, and employers to ensure broader access and inclusivity for all students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This collaborative approach will foster stronger connections between educational institutions, local communities, and industry, enriching students' career exploration and preparation.</p>
Centralised and Accessible CIAG Resources	<p>Key Recommendation 4</p> <p>High-quality CIAG resources, both online and offline, will be readily accessible and tailored to the individual needs of individuals, including students, parents/carers, teachers, careers and employability advisers, work coaches, community workers, employers, sectoral and professional bodies and trade unions.</p>	<p>4a. Assess the Feasibility of a County-wide Centralised CIAG Resources Online Platform. Review the accessibility and content of existing platforms and webpages, within and beyond Durham County Council, offering high-quality CIAG resources for young people and adults tailored to specific needs. Identify good practice features, specific sections or tools for different user groups (e.g., students, parents, careers advisers, work coaches, employers), and personalised CIAG based on age, career stage, and aspirations. Encourage education institutions, employers, and other key stakeholders to contribute to and more readily share career resources, templates, case studies, career insights and digital innovations.</p> <p>4b. Distribute Physical Resources to Hard-to-Reach Areas. Work with local libraries, community centres, health and finance sectors, foodbanks and educational institutions to distribute offline resources in areas with limited broadband access, ensuring no one is excluded from accessing CIAG support.</p> <p>4c. Accelerate the production and dissemination of labour market intelligence (LMI) until NECA and Skills England is more fully established. The DfE 'LMI for All' initiative is no longer funded which creates 'a temporary void' in access to latest LMI trends. Therefore, review existing arrangements beyond a reliance on Durham Insights which many practitioners seldom use in their work with clients. Take steps to assess and prioritise the production of high-quality LMI for young people and adults. There is potential to learn from successful models in other parts of the UK, including e.g. London, Northern Ireland, Wales, Scotland, Norway.</p>

Theme	Key Recommendations	Key Actions
Innovation in Usage of Digital Tools	<p>Key Recommendation 5</p> <p>Pilot cutting-edge digital advancements, such as gaming, virtual reality, virtual centres of excellence in specific growth sectors, chatbot technology, and other digital support tools, can provide access to trustworthy labour market intelligence (LMI), to enhance CIAG delivery. These technologies can provide engaging, accessible, and personalised support, where appropriate, to users of all ages.</p>	<p>5a Pilot Advanced Digital Tools: Learn from other digital tools that engage young people and adults effectively in career exploration and decision-making available 24:7 (e.g. Huxby and CiCi AI chatbots using large language models). Undertake a feasibility study on the potential to connect transport timetables to career opportunities using AI.</p> <p>5b. Co-Create Virtual Centres of Excellence: Develop virtual centres for specific growth sectors (e.g., technology, green energy, healthcare) to provide users with sector-specific resources, training opportunities, and insights on emerging careers. Learn from successful examples, such as New Brunswick, Canada, and other innovative Centres of Excellence within and outside the county.</p> <p>5C. Leverage Digital Tools for Enhanced CIAG. Integrate more fully interactive features on websites and webpages, allowing users to explore career journeys, job market trends, course information and personalised information based on their interests and location. Educational institutions, careers, employability, and enterprise services can benefit greatly from sharing best practices and collaborating on innovative solutions, making it easier for both young people and adults to engage in career exploration and decision-making. Monitor progress, showcase innovations and work collaboratively to attract investment.</p>
Build Capacity and Collaboration Between and Across Agencies	<p>Key Recommendation 6</p> <p>Core CIAG agencies alongside allied community organisations should achieve their CIAG-related development goals through a comprehensive range of shared training, professional development activities, and co-designed resources.</p>	<p>6a. Establish Collaborative Professional Development and Training. Harness county-wide and local networks with a cross-agency focus and explore options for professional development activities for careers advisers, teachers, health, finance and community workers focusing on skills development, knowledge sharing, and best practices in CIAG. Build on career guidance best practice, coaching, employability support, and mentoring e.g. Estonia's Public Employment Service has successfully co-developed professional development sessions within a multi-agency approach.</p> <p>6b. Recruit and attract more career guidance professionals to the county. Invest in increasing capacity and support collaborative skills training and the development of high-quality CIAG resources. Co-design resources and communities of practice. Facilitate collaborative workshops with stakeholders to co-design CIAG resources that are tailored to the needs of various groups and sectors, ensuring accessibility and relevance for all users.</p> <p>6c. Promote Collaborative Research and Networking. Support collaborative research initiatives between education institutions, businesses, and community groups to gather data on student outcomes and labour market trends, informing CIAG services. Host regular cross-agency networking events or conferences to allow professionals from various sectors to exchange ideas and collaborate on shared CIAG goals and initiatives.</p>
Publicise and Promote the CIAG Offer	<p>Key Recommendation 7</p> <p>All young people, parents, adults, employers, and community workers will have a clear understanding of the entitlement to good-quality CIAG and how to access it effectively. Initiatives should focus on enhancing the visibility and accessibility of CIAG services supported by the development of clear, consistent and recognisable branding at a county and local level.</p>	<p>7a. Moving towards the integration of Jobcentre Plus and the National Careers Service, these and other careers support agencies, should take joint action to publicise CIAG support. This will help ensure that all young people, parents, adults (in and those of work), clearly understand their entitlement to high-quality CIAG and how to access it effectively.</p> <p>7b. Connect with marketing and branding specialists within County Durham. Explore the status of existing brands where CIAG promotional piggy-back activities could potentially be achieved e.g. Durham County Council and others to reduce brain drain and increase brain gain in the county.</p> <p>7c. Use social media platforms and other County Durham campaigns to reach out to young people, vulnerable groups, and adults in the workplace, encouraging them to make the most of available CIAG resources. This includes promoting inspirational role models, freely available resources, including mid-life reviews, to support individuals in making informed choices and decisions about their careers and futures.</p>

These provide a foundation that can be reviewed and expanded to achieve the ambitions of the County Durham All-Age Careers Framework, guided by strong senior leadership and governance. **To support efforts in attracting further investment into County Durham as a beacon of excellence and innovation in CIAG for both young people and adults, we offered practical ideas for action presented to the UKSPF Technical Funding Group.**

Achieving this Direction of Travel

Over the next ten years, County Durham, along with a newly formed pan-sector Steering Group can work more collaboratively to co-design, co-produce, communicate and deliver improved CIAG services. The focus will be on strengthening the talent pipeline and inclusivity, ensuring that services are accessible to everyone in the county, with particular attention to those most in need of support, ultimately delivering a more impactful hybrid CIAG delivery model. We propose a County Durham All-Age Careers Framework, as outlined below to drive forward the vision, key principles, priorities and progress measures.



These recommendations and actions provide a foundation that can be reviewed and expanded to achieve the ambitions of the County Durham all-age careers framework guided by strong leadership and governance.

Conclusion

This approach, recommendations and ideas for action should be supported by passionate, dedicated individuals who can drive engagement and raise awareness. While goodwill and volunteer efforts can contribute, meaningful engagement at scale will require budgetary support to implement effectively.

We conclude by reinforcing the need for career exploration and lifelong guidance to help transform people's lives. This is also important for a cohesive and just society, and for a productive County Durham economy. Durham County Council and partners are committed to ensuring that children, young people, and adults from all backgrounds in the county have the opportunity to benefit from high quality careers information, advice and guidance. This should become an entitlement going forward.

We have set out a bold new approach to supporting inclusion, equality, diversity, social mobility, economic development growth and prosperity for all. County Durham has all the ingredients to become a local, regional and national beacon of excellence in CIAG between now and 2035.

Appendix 1: Glossary of Terms

AI	Artificial Intelligence
Career	A lifestyle concept that involves the sequence of occupations (paid and unpaid) in which one engages throughout a lifetime, including work, learning and leisure activities.
CD	Career development is the lifelong process of managing learning, work, leisure, and transitions in order to move toward a personally determined and evolving preferred future.
CE	Career education is the curricula and programmes that provide information and experiences that help young people make meaningful career and education decisions
CEIAG	Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance (a term commonly used within education institutions)
CI	Careers information,” “occupational information,” and “labour market information” overlap. Broadly defined, these terms encompass the full range of information about labour market conditions and trends, including employment and unemployment, industry and occupational employment and wages, labour market information and projections, individual workers or jobseekers, and providers of education and training.
CIAG	Careers Information, Advice and Guidance (a term commonly used within and outside education and employability organisations)
CG	Careers guidance consists of services and highly trained professionals that help people successfully manage their career development. It is an inclusive term that has been used to describe a range of interventions including career education and counselling. Career guidance can incorporate career information, advice, career education and career counselling.
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
DfE	Department for Education
DWP	Department for Work & Pensions
EET	Education, Employment and Training
ELGPN	European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network
EMP	Employability
ENT	Enterprise

ESF	European Social Fund
FE	Further Education
HE	Higher Education
IAG	Information, Advice and Guidance
ICCDPP	International Centre for Career Development and Public Policy
IER	Institute for Employment Research
IES	Inclusive Economic Strategy
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IMD	Index of Multiple Deprivation
ITF	Inspiring the Future and Primary Futures
LLMs	Large Language Models
LLG	Lifelong Guidance
LMI	Labour Market Intelligence / Information
NEET	Not in Education, Employment or Training
NECA	North East Combined Authority
NELSIP	North East Local Skills Improvement Plan
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PAS	Poverty Action Strategy
PES	Public Employment Service
ROI	Return on Investment
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
SDS	Skills Development Scotland
SOC	Standard Occupational Classification
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
UKSPF	UK Shared Prosperity Fund
VET	Vocational Education and Training
YOI	Young Offenders Institution